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Sarah-Ji (Love & Struggle Photos) Interview

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Documenting Grassroots Movements in Chicago: An Interview with Sarah Ji
Interviewer - Aggie Kallinicou
Artist – Sarah-Ji
Location - In Person - Chicago, IL
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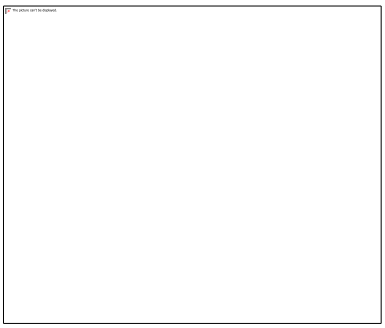
Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2018 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media & Design.



Artist Bio: "Sarah-Ji is a movement photographer who has been documenting freedom struggles in Chicago since 2010. Her long term work is to build a world in which prisons and police are not necessary, and no one is disposable. Sarah is a core member of For The People Artists Collective and organizes with Love & Protect and documents under the name Love & Struggle Photos. She and her daughter Cadence currently live in Rogers Park."

Photo and bio courtesy of artist.

Interview Transcript:

Aggie Kallinicou: Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Sarah-Ji: My name is Sarah. I go by the name Sarah-Ji for my artist name. I was born in Seoul, Korea, and I moved to Chicago when I was about six, so right when I was about to enter first grade. I grew up on the North Side of Chicago so I've pretty much been in Chicago most of my life, went to Chicago public schools, went to college and grad school here in the city. I'm pretty much a.. I mean, not a native [laughs] but it's the only place I've really lived.

AK: Do you have memories of living in Korea?

SJ: I remember that the month before my family moved, my parents sent me to the countryside where my grandfather lived. My mom's side of the family is from a smaller town than Seoul called Gwangju a couple hours from the city. My grandfather ran a kindergarten so if I wanted to I could go there but if not I could roam around the countryside and play. I also remember the entire city of Seoul is built on hills, and that's what I remember most. When I left Korea, we didn't even have paved roads in my neighborhood. Most families didn't own cars because they were for the wealthy. When I came to Chicago I had only ever ridden in taxi cabs.

AK: Wow, it's interesting that you moved from that setting to Chicago. As someone who was also born abroad and moved at a young age, I can say it's incredible that you still have those memories. How would you define or categorize your art or yourself?

SJ: There's this artist I really admire because he's also a movement artist, organizer, and activist. His name is Ricardo Levins Morales and he's based out of Minneapolis now but he used to be based out of Chicago. I like the way he defines himself, he describes himself as a "Healer and trickster organizer disguised as an artist." Along those lines I would identify myself as a collective liberation co-struggler and abolitionist organizer disguised as a photographer. The work that I do most people would categorize as movement art because it's art that's made for building mass movements and political movements. Before I did that I documented everyday life as a photographer. Even before I was political, I mainly documented my life and the life around me in Chicago.

AK: How did you first get into photography? Did anyone inspire you?

SJ: I dabbled in photography as a teenager. My dad was a news reporter in Korea and when he first got the job in the 60s my grandfather bought him a Contax camera similar to a Leica camera today that helped him become an amateur photographer. When we moved to the states I remember we almost missed our connecting flight in Tokyo because my dad was buying a camera in the duty free shop [laughs]. That was a camera I ended up playing around with when I became a teenager and started taking photos. When I graduated from grad school as a gift to myself I bought a 35mm film camera, but I didn't become serious about it until I had my daughter 13 years ago. With her, I had someone to photograph every day. When she was a baby she didn't tell me she didn't want to be photographed [laughs] so it was like always having a model. I was able to document everyday life as a mother in the city and that's how I honed my craft as a photographer. It wasn't until 2010 when I became politicized around struggles here in Chicago that I started using my photography to document the work people were doing and the grassroots struggles that were happening.

AK: On your website it says one of your goals is to build a world in which police and prisons are not necessary. Can you tell me a little bit more about this?

SJ: This is near and dear to my heart because it identifies my framework for not just my politics but how I live my life. When people hear abolition of police or prisons they think that it's impossible or that they would be unsafe. What people should really think about is, what are police and prisons doing to make us safe? Do they actually make us safe? Is it justice to put someone in a cage because they've done harm? Why do we as a society use punishment as a response? How does punishment bring healing?

SJ: This is also connected to being a mother. I joke that I'm an abolitionist because my daughter refused to be punished as a child, and so I had to look at other ways of disciplining her without punishment which was difficult. It forced me to think about the role of punishment in society and in every aspect of relationships. How do we punish each other in relationships? How do we use that to control each other? What are the results? Is that actually what we want? If we want to think about not having police or prisons, we have to create the conditions in which they are no longer needed. That would mean re-imagining how we operate and relate to each other, and what relationships look like.

SJ: I heard the activist and scholar Dr. Ruthie Gilmore speak last month and I love the way she put it. She said abolition is not simply about getting rid of police or prisons but about presence

and creating the conditions where people's basic needs are being met. Housing, access to food, living wages, not having to worry about environmental disaster threatening your life. Those are all things that are part of an abolitionist framework. It's not just about getting rid of police and prisons, and that's not going to happen overnight. We need other things in place. That's the exciting part; we get to imagine a different way of living, a different world. We don't have to be limited by what we've been told or what we're used to. Especially because the reality is that police and prisons didn't always exist.

SJ: In this country the root of prisons and police is about social control of certain groups of people, whether it's poor people or black people after slavery. Slave patrols were the root of police in some regions, and in many cases police existed to protect wealthy people's property. I do see more people questioning, do we really need the police? We live in a city where we spend four million dollars a day on police, and where the mayor wants to build a $95 million cop academy in a poor black neighborhood that's already heavily policed. We need to ask new questions and be open to new answers. Who even gets to define what a crime is? How is crime defined? Usually as a way to control certain people. The world I want to live in and the world I want to leave my daughter is not a world in which police, prisons, surveillance, and militarization are considered structures that contribute to community safety. I want us to rethink community safety and I think there are better ways of doing it that don't involve those practices.

AK: Yes, I think that's why the work you're doing is so important because as you said this isn't something we are taught in our education system. I didn't learn about any of this until I came to college and started reading books like *The New Jim Crow*. At first I wondered, why are these not topics we talk about in earlier education?

SJ: I think it's on purpose. I do think education in this country is used as another form of social control because that information is out there, so why aren't we teaching it in our schools? Some schools do, but most of them don't. I had to read it on my own as an adult. I read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and my mind was totally blown. I realized life was not what I thought it was at all.

AK: Exactly. My friends and I talk about how we were never taught any of this important history or information. It's something you really have to seek out for yourself.

SJ: It speaks to our backgrounds and what communities we were raised in because young black people grew up having to inhabit black bodies. If they lived in predominantly black or poor communities, they know this stuff because it's their lives and they've experienced it. It's really made me challenge my own privileges of how and where I was raised and how it's a privilege to not know these things because for some people it's not a choice.

AK: Definitely. Going along with that, what made you focus your work on the prison system? Have you had any personal experiences with these injustices?

SJ: I didn't start out wanting to focus on issues relating to the prison system. It just naturally happened mainly because of who the people were that had strong influences on me when I first became politicized. One of those people was Mariame Kaba, the executive director of an organization in Chicago called Project Nia which has a mission to end youth incarceration and to

challenge communities to rethink crime and violence. I met her in 2011 and she has this blog called USPrisonCulture.com that used to be really prolific. It's a treasure trove of political information as it relates to the prison industrial complex here in the US and how policing is connected to that and the racial component as well. Through working with her I naturally began to do my own research and become educated on issues related to prisons and abolition. One of the things we would do is I would document actions (protests, events, things like that) and she would take my photos and write blog posts using them. That was the first meaningful use of my photos in a political way. It gave me motivation to keep documenting what was going on in Chicago. We're practically the same age but she has so much more political experience than I do, she's been organizing since she was a teenager. She became a mentor and a really close friend and that's how I got into organizing around abolition.

AK: Could you talk a little about your Love + Struggle project and why you chose Chicago as the setting?

SJ: I call it Love and Struggle because I feel that love and struggle are interconnected. Struggle is a part of existence and the oppressive systems that we live in and at the root of struggling against those oppressions has to be love. The reason I chose Chicago is simply because it's where I live. I know photographers who go from protest to protest in different cities to cover what's happening at the time and I've never felt that urge because my work is rooted in Chicago. This is where I have relationships and community. The people I'm documenting are not just subjects to me, these are my friends and the people I love. I see my documentation as a tool. This is the one thing I know how to do [laughs], somehow I know how to take pictures and it feels totally natural to me. It's like brushing my teeth. It's the one thing I can do without having to think too much about it. I've chosen to do that as my contribution to the movement and it's been really instrumental in establishing and building relationships with different communities in Chicago.

AK: What inspired you to become involved in the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements?

SJ: Mainly it was a natural outcome of working with Mariame Kaba. The root of Black Lives Matter is when Trayvon Martin was killed in Florida by George Zimmerman who was basically a vigilante wanting to be law enforcement. After he was put on trial and found not guilty there was this confirmation within black communities of how they're not seen as human. From that, the BLM hashtag was created by three black women and that's how the movement was born. Around the same time, organizing was being done here in Chicago locally as well. I remember there were teach ins being done about Trayvon Martin. For a lot of people, he was the entry point to learning more about police violence and anti-blackness as a phenomenon here in the US but also globally. In response to the non-indictment of Zimmerman, BYP100 (Black Youth Project) was created so a lot of young black people in Chicago were organizing specifically around police violence. Then in Spring of 2014 a young black man by the name of Dominique "Damo" Franklin was tased by the police for allegedly stealing a bottle of liquor from Walgreens. He hit his head on a light pole and died a few days later. Damo happened to be part of an organization called Circles and Ciphers that Mariame's organization had incubated. She was close with a lot of the young people within Circles and Ciphers and although she had not known Damo

personally a lot of the people she had mentored, loved and cared for (as had I) were devastated by his death.

SJ: There was so much fury, anger, and pain, and Mariame realized that we needed a container for that. She gathered people around the city who were doing youth development or abolitionist work and explained what had happened and proposed a response. That became the formation of a group called We Charge Genocide which started in June of 2014. Mike Brown was murdered in August 2014 two months later in Ferguson, and the whole nation erupted around BLM. I had started documenting all the protests related to BLM here in Chicago I was able to get to and I also organized with We Charge Genocide. The thing that's been really important to me throughout my work in Chicago as a photographer has been that I'm not just documenting and I'm not just a photographer. I'm also organizing and in relationship with people who are doing the work. I feel accountability to the communities I'm documenting and if I didn't have that accountability I wouldn't feel right doing this work. That's how I got started with BLM.

SJ: Say Her Name grew out of that movement as well. It was actually started by BYP100 when they called for a national day of mobilization to draw attention to all of the black women who have died from state and interpersonal violence. People would take to the streets for black men but when black women were being killed we saw so little mobilization. Especially around the murder of Rekia Boyd who was killed by Dante Servin, an off-duty police officer. There was mobilization around getting Dante fired because we knew he would never be found guilty of anything because cops in Chicago literally get away with murder all the time. Rekia's brother Martinez was at every protest, every police board meeting, he was someone people developed a relationship with. He wasn't just a face on the news and his sister wasn't just someone who had died. It was meaningful to me and to a lot of the people who were organizing in honor of Rekia. Around that same time there was a campaign to free Marissa Alexander. She was a black mother in Florida who fired a warning shot into the ceiling because she feared for her life from her estranged husband. She was facing sixty years in prison.

SJ: Soon after her case, Zimmerman was found not guilty because of stand your ground laws so people wondered why she wasn't found innocent for the same reason when she clearly feared for her life. There was a renewed effort to free her and Mariame did a teach in in Chicago about her and they created a support committee for her defense in Chicago called Chicago Alliance to Free Marissa Alexander. I started working with them and she was eventually freed as a result of organizing around the country. After Marissa was freed we changed our name to Love and Protect and that's one of the organizations I primarily organize with right now. We support women, trans, non binary people of color who have been criminalized because they've tried to defend themselves which is really common. There's a lot of intersection between criminalized survivors and SHN. Long story but there's a lot of history involved in how I got started with these movements and the organizing work I do.

AK: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity in your work?

SJ: That's a really interesting question because as an immigrant who left their home country as a young person, it kind of feels like an uprooting where my identity becomes a question mark. I wasn't raised in a way that was protective of Korean culture, but we also didn't assimilate. It's impossible to assimilate when I'm visibly 'othered'. It's obvious when people ask me where I'm

from that they're not asking me where I'm from. They want to know, why aren't you white? I've always had this yearning for home because I've never felt at home here in the U.S. I question whether I'm ever going to feel at home and it's something I've been thinking about a lot recently specifically because of the talks between North and South Korea that are happening.

SJ: Both of my parents lived through the Korean War and I have family in North Korea. My grandmother was in North Korea and became separated from her family because of the war. I know that there's a lot of trauma that my family went through from colonization, living under Japanese occupation, the war, and U.S. occupation. Even though Korea is supposed to be its own government it's basically been an occupation. I've been thinking about my own family history and my identity and that's been expressed in my work. It's been characterized as being really nostalgic and that's accurate because it's rooted in a longing for something. Especially the documentation work I did before I was politicized. I was trying to create a sense of home for myself by creating these mementos of my life that I could visually and tangibly see and it was connected to this feeling of not being rooted in a place. Even the term Asian American, that's a big umbrella [laughs]. I haven't really done work in art around that identity but it's something I'm thinking of right now.

AK: What are you currently working on?

SJ: I'm part of an artist collective called For the People and it's made up of movement artists in Chicago who are also organizers. We create art for the movements here in Chicago whether its banners for campaigns or actions or signs. We just put on a city wide exhibition called Do Not Resist? 100 Years of Chicago Police Violence. That was at four different locations across the city and it was really massive and amazing. I was one of the curators for that exhibit and I would like to do something similar in the future. I have a full time day job but part of my work is showing up and so I'll show up with my camera to document these movements. One of the projects I do every year is called the Love and Struggle in the Chi calendar. Every month I'll put photos from an action or protest from the previous year and a little synopsis so people can be reminded of what we've done. It's important to document these events and have these images of how we've struggled. Sometimes we win and when we don't we continue to struggle. They say the struggle continues.

SJ: The other thing related to my recent ponderings about identity is that I want to go back to Korea within the next five years and use my camera to create a visual narrative of memories whether its memories of places I lived in or of people who were close to me and trying to put the pieces together because it's so fuzzy. Part of that is because I don't have a lot of photographs and because I was so young when I left. I do have certain memories but there are so many holes. Memories are really important to me and that's one of the reasons I started taking photos. I didn't want to forget what happened. I want to use my camera as a tool for stirring those memories and as a way to help my daughter connect to my roots which are now part of her roots. I haven't thought it through yet [laughs] but that's something I really want to do. I haven't been back since 1991 and I've been putting it off since my daughter was born because I want her to be old enough to remember it.

AK: Do you still have a lot of family there?

SJ: I still have a lot of family there but it's so weird because you have this family but you're separated by so much distance, time, and language. Even though I can speak and understand Korean it's not to the level where I can have in-depth conversations with people. Even with my mother. It'll be interesting, I think I'll have to study Korean before I go [laughs].

AK: It is interesting. My dad's side of the family still resides in the country I'm from and having that experience has brought into question my definition of family. When you're not seeing people consistently and you don't have these shared experiences and memories, it can be really hard to connect.

SJ: Yes it can. For me personally I'm so different from the rest of my family in terms of what I do and also politically. I was raised in a pretty conservative evangelical Christian family and most of my biological family is like that so I've pretty much had to create my own family.

AK: It seems like you have through your relationships with organizers and artists in Chicago. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me, I've learned a lot about grassroots movements in Chicago and the artists documenting them.

SJ: You're welcome!

End.